

Basic Structure of Hindi Poetry **Part 1- Structural Units of a Poem**

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1. Introduction

Poetry is essentially an expression of feelings. Ability to feel is a human trait. We all have feelings. However, ability to express the feelings in a manner that other people can identify and relate to those feelings requires artistic skills. That is what distinguishes a great poet from the rest of us. It is not really possible to pinpoint a precise system or algorithm that would raise a piece of text to the higher level of a good poem. However, certain rules of structure and composition have been developed over the years that can make a text rhythmic and lyrical, which are important ingredients of poetry.

In this article my attempt is to share my personal understanding of the craft of poetry with the readers of Kaavyaalaya. This article is based upon some books and magazine articles that I have been reading over the years. Since I am writing all this by memory, I cannot give specific references to what I write here. Even some of the technical terms that I have used, may not be authentic or universally accepted. Readers should consult a more professional and scholarly book for properly learning the craft of poetry.

Presumably all languages have their own system of rules or structure for poetry. My subject matter of interest in these articles is limited to Hindi poetry. I will talk a little bit about Urdu poetry because of its intimate relationship with Hindi poetry. I have given various examples in these articles for the purpose of illustration. All the examples are written in Devanaagari (Hindi) in order to avoid a possible distortion in the meaning caused by Hindi written in Roman script. I have quoted most of the example poems by memory, which is prone to errors for which I apologize.

At the outset, I thank Vani Murarka for many useful discussions that helped significantly in writing this article and for her editorial help in preparing the manuscript. A preliminary version of this article was presented at the Kaavyaalaya poetry group on Facebook in the year 2012.

1A. The lay out of the article

This article is in parts as described below:

Part 1: (this one) Structural Units of a Poem

Part 2: Maatraa (मात्रा) or the meter of poems – for तुकान्त and छंदोबद्ध poetry – i.e. poems that follow a clear rhyme and rhythm. These are perhaps the most important ingredients of the craft of poetry.

Part 3: Maatraa (मात्रा) or the meter of poems – for अतुकान्त poetry (i.e. free verse)

Part 4: Urdu poetry

1B. The craft and the art of poetry

Hindi KaavyaShaastra (हिंदी काव्यशास्त्र -the craft of Hindi poetry) is a very technical, very advanced, and huge topic. I can only give a glimpse of the system. Moreover, excellent treatise on KaavyaShaastra in Hindi have been published. Hindi KaavyaShaastra has very precise, very rigorous rules for poetry that it inherited from Sanskrit and has many dimensions. Still, it allows a lot of flexibility as we will see later.

KaavyaShaastra actually means the science or the system (in the engineering sense) of poetry. There are two main aspects of KaavyaShaastra – KaavyaShilp (काव्यशिल्प , the craft of poetry) and KaavyaKala (काव्यकला, the art of poetry). In this article series, I am going to discuss KaavyaShilp. The craft of poetry is important but it is obviously the art that is the heart of poetry. Perfect craft can make a poem good but it is the art of poetry that makes a poem great. The art of poetry is necessarily subjective and individual like other fine arts for which no rules can be defined. Maybe someday I will also share my own thoughts about the art of poetry in a separate article.

The craft of Urdu poetry, being relatively recent, appears to be somewhat limited as compared to Hindi poetry. Both Hindi and Urdu poems can be tukaant (तुकांत या छंदोबद्ध) or the so called atukaant (अतुकान्त). Atukaantkavita is usually called mukta-kavita मुक्त कविता (free verse) or azaad-nazm (आज़ादनज़्म) in Urdu. Both mukt-kavita and azaad-nazm are relatively recent - essentially a late 20th century development. In Hindi it has become very common now. In Urdu, perhaps Noon Meem Raashid was the first one to write azaad-nazm (ऐ मेरी हमरक्स मुझको थाम ले). It is still not very common in Urdu.

A poem by definition is singable (गेय) or at least hummable (जो गुनगुनायी जा सके). That is almost the only real tangible difference between verse (पद्य) and prose (गद्य). Every poem must be singable or hummable, be it mukt-kavita or chhandobaddh. This requires a poem to have two essential characteristics- laya (लय or meter) and gat (गत या धुन, in English - rhyme). These concepts are analogous to the corresponding concepts in Indian music. Laya is the rhythm and corresponds to maatraa in music as in tabla. I will write about the maatraa count in part 2. For the time being, take it just as a measure of the length of the line and its rhythm.

Tuk (तुक) is the rhyme of a poem. In tukant poems, all rhyming lines must end at the same sound (or a letter, a word or even a phrase). In addition, the rhyming lines must approach the last sound with identical ascent or descent. If the lines in a tukaant-kavita end in a group of words (all lines ending with the same group) then the last word preceding that group must rhyme. That is the meaning of तुक मिलाना, which determines the gat or dhun. It corresponds to raag in music except that in poetry it is not always prescribed in terms of known music raags and is not limited to prescribed rules of Indian classical music. However, it does define the way one would recite the poem. I will write something about the mukt-kavita later, but contrary to what some people seem to think, a mukt-kavita must also be singable.

2. Structural Components of a poem

A poem consists of units. A unit consist of a sthaayee or 'tek' (स्थायी या टेक) , an antara (अंतरा), a samaapti (समाप्ति) or closing line just like in Indian music. I have seen different words used for samaapti like छन्दांत (chhandaant), which seems to be more appropriate. A long poem would consist of several such units but a short poem may have only one unit. I will give illustrative examples a little later. A poem starts with the Sthaayee that defines the mood and meter of the poem and is repeated after every unit. Sometimes a sthaayee is accompanied by another line (सहयोगी) which, in general, is not repeated, but can be repeated for emphasis. It is also possible to have a sahyogee of samaapti. The rule is that sthaayee and sahyogee must rhyme with each other.

Antaraa, in general, does not rhyme with the sthaayee but samaapti must rhyme with the sthaayee. The laya or maatraa of all the parts of the unit - sthaayee, sahyogee, antaraa, and samaapti must be the same. It is OK to have a sthaayee which does not have the same number of maatraas as the poem but it should be, preferably, an even fraction of the main maatraa count. This allows the stahaayee to be repeated or introducing a pause that is covered by the tabla without losing the 'sum' (सम) of the beat. The structure of a unit is quite flexible. It may or may not have a sthaayee, sahyogee, or samaapati. I will come to these exceptions later. In fact one major exception is Tulsidas' RamcharitMaanas.

The units are units of repetition that set the overall rhythm of a poem. Repetition of a unit, as also in music, gives periodicity to a poem. Periodicity is a characteristic of music and makes the whole rendering of a poem effective and lyrically pleasing. A unit can consist of just the antara or a set of antaraas without sthaayee. The antara consists of a chhand (छंद). A chhand in Hindi can have various forms- dohaa (दोहा), chaupaayee (चौपाई), savaiyaa (सवैया) etc. It can be dwipadee (द्विपदी - two lines), Tripadi (त्रिपदी - three lines), Chatuspadi (चतुष्पदी - 4 lines), Panchpadi (पंचपदी - 5 lines), Shasthpadi (शष्टपदी - six lines), Ashtpadee (अष्टपदी - eight lines) etc. Chhands of seven or more than eight lines are also acceptable but do not seem to be very common. All the lines should rhyme with each other, or follow a periodic pattern of rhyming. In fact periodicity is an essential element of rhyming. In the adhunik-kaal (modern era), it is also a practice that in chatuspadee, first, second, and fourth line will rhyme but the third line may not rhyme with the other three. It seems to be an impact of Urdu poetry to which I will come back later.

In spite of the rigorous rules, there is a considerable amount of flexibility in Hindi poetry. The structure of poetry as defined above is not really rigid. A unit can be without a sthaayee. For example, in RamcharitManas, a unit is a doha (or sorath सोरठ) plus 8 chaupaayees. In practice, people add a sthaayee in the form of what is known as 'sampur' (सम्पुट) - a chaupaayee that is read after each dohaa. People also add sthaayee like "Jai SiyaaRaam, Jai jaiHanumaanaa". They look like just religious expressions but if you note carefully, they are in the same rhythm and play the role of the sthaayee. A poem can be just a collection of dohas like those of Kabir, and many other poets of that time, but each doha follows the same laya or rhythm of maatraas. Even though the tuk of each doha may be different, they follow the same raag or dhun.

A poem can be just one unit like written by Surdas, and Meeraa but they have a sthaayee. One characteristic of doha, that was imported into Urdu poetry is that each doha is a couplet that contains a complete statement and each doha can be independent. You can see that in dohaas of Kabir and Rahim.

Many other variations were introduced in the 20th century by top poets like Pant, Nirala, MahadeviVarma. Every variation brought its own charm. The important thing is that the variations were in the structure of units. We suppose the flexibility is consistent with the tradition of intellectual freedom in the Hindu Indian culture that accepts and respects the creativity of intellectuals (but that is another topic). Apparently the only unbreakable rule is the rule of maatraa and dhun. The rules of laya and gat (dhun) are always obeyed because they add the characteristic charm to poems. Once again we wish to emphasize that the rules of laya and gat also apply to mukt-kavita.

3. Examples

I will give two examples to illustrate the structure of poetry. The first example is the great poem '[Jhansi kee Rani](#)' by SubhadraKumariChauhan. The structure follows the system perfectly.

(Sahyogee)

बुंदेले हरबोलों के मुँह हमने सुनी कहानी थी।

(Sthayee- repeated after every antara)

खूब लड़ी मर्दानी वह तो झाँसी वाली रानी थी।

(Antara)

जाओ रानी, याद रखेंगे हम कृतज्ञ भारत वासी,
यह तेरा बलिदान जगावेगा स्वतंत्रता अविनासी,
होवे चुप इतिहास, लगे सच्चाई को चाहे फाँसी,
हो मदमाती विजय, मिटादे गोलों से चाहे झाँसी।

(Samaapti)

तेरा स्मारक तू ही होगी, तू खुद अमिट निशानी थी।

(Sthayee- repeated. Sahyogee may also be repeated for emphasis)

खूब लड़ी मर्दानी वह तो झाँसी वाली रानी थी।

Note that sthayee, sahyogee, and samaapti all rhyme with each other - kahaaneethee, raanee thee, nishaanee thee). Here sahyogee precedes sthayee which is allowed. Antara is a chatushpadee with all four lines rhyming with each other - bhaaratvaasee, avinaasee, phaansee, and jhaansee. The above is one complete unit and the whole poem consists of several such units.

Incidentally, it is said that in the original poem, the fourth line of the antara was "हो मदमाते ब्रिटिश, मिटादे गोलों से चाहे झाँसी।" . However, the publisher got too frightened of the local British officers at the time of publication and changed the words "मदमाते ब्रिटिश" to "मदमाती विजय" without the poet's approval. It may be true because "मदमाती विजय" does not fit very well with the intensity of the anger of the poet in the closing lines.

As a second example, consider the following beauty by Jaishankar Prasad:

ले चल मुझे भुलावा देकर, मेरे नाविक धीरे धीरे।
जिस निर्जन में सागर लहरी,
अम्बर के कानों में गहरी,
निश्छल प्रेम कथा कहती हो तज कोलाहल की अवनीरे।
ले चल मुझे भुलावा देकर, मेरे नाविक धीरे धीरे।

In the above "ले चल मुझे ..." is sthaayee. The antara is a dwipadee- consisting of two lines - "जिस निर्जन में ... " and "अम्बर के कानों में...". Samaapti is "निश्छल प्रेम कथा...". Note that in 'tuk' every line finishes at 're' and the preceding letter/ascent "dhee" in "dheere" rhymes with each line- 'nee' in avanee. Some amateur poets do not follow this rule that deprives the poem of its lyrical charm.

Another thing to note in Prasad's poem is that antara is not a complete sentence. The sentence is completed only by including the sahyogi. जिस निर्जन में सागर लहरी, अम्बर के कानों में गहरी, निश्छल प्रेम कथा कहती हो तज कोलाहल की अवनी रे. In 'Jhansi kee Rani', each antara is a complete statement. Such liberties are acceptable in the structure of poetry.

4. Muktkavita

Mukt-kavita is of course free from the structure described above. I will not discuss the details of mukt-kavita here but I would like to emphasize that mukt-kavita must also have some kind of rhythm and pattern. Many poets ignore this requirement at the cost of the charm of the poetry. As a model for muktkavita, you can read DharmveerBharti's Kanupriya. [Some portions of this lovely poem are available on Kaavyaalaya](#). A long poem such as this one, necessarily has a structure of units. I will quote one piece here:

भय, संशय, गोपन, उदासी
ये सभी ढीठ, चंचल, सरचढ़ी सहेलियों की तरह
मुझे घेर लेती हैं,
और मैं कितना चाह कर भी तुम्हारे पास ठीक उसी समय
नहीं पहुँच पाती जब आम्र मंजरियों के नीचे
अपनी बाँसुरी में मेरा नाम भर कर तुम बुलाते हो!
उस दिन तुम उस बौर लदे आम की
झुकी डालियों से टिके कितनी देर मुझे वंशी से टेरते रहे
ढलते सूरज की उदास काँपती किरणें
तुम्हारे माथे मे मोर पंखों
से बेबस विदा माँगने लगीं -
मैं नहीं आयी।

In fact the poet does repeat the line "main nahee aayee" in some stanzas and uses it as the sthaayee for emphasis.

5. Self-practice

As an exercise for self-practice, I invite you to consider the following two poem snippets to identify the structural components sthaayee, antaraa etc. One is the classic poem "[Is Paar Us Paar](#)" by Bachchan. The other, relatively less known poem is "[Lo Wahī Hua](#)" by Dinesh Singh. One demonstrates the structure outlined above quite accurately. The other demonstrates the use of structure as well as the artistic innovations allowed in Hindi poetry.

इस पार, प्रिये मधु है तुम हो, उस पार न जाने क्या होगा!
यह चाँद उदित होकर नभ में कुछ ताप मिटाता जीवन का,
लहरा लहरा यह शाखाएँ कुछ शोक भुला देती मन का,
कल मुझाने वाली कलियाँ हँसकर कहती हैं मगन रहो,
बुल बुल तरु की फुनगी पर से संदेश सुनाती यौवन का,

तुम देकर मदिरा के प्याले मेरा मन बहला देती हो,
उस पार मुझे बहलाने का उपचार न जाने क्या होगा!
इस पार, प्रिये मधु है तुम हो, उस पार न जाने क्या होगा!

लो वही हुआ जिसका था डर,
ना रही नदी, ना रही लहर।

सूरज की किरन दहाड़ गई,
गरमी हर देह उघाड़ गई,
उठ गया बवंडर, धूल हवा में -
अपना झंडा गाड़ गई,
गौरइया हाँफ रही डर कर,
ना रही नदी, ना रही लहर।

हर ओर उमस के चर्चे हैं,
बिजली पंखों के खर्चे हैं,
बूढ़े महुए के हाथों से,
उड़ रहे हवा में पर्चे हैं,
"चलना साथी लू से बच कर".
ना रही नदी, ना रही लहर।

In part 2, I will write about maatraa and meter of poetry.

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